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THE Princess Virginia

By C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON,
Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "Resurrexion
in Search of a Father," Etc.

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(CONTINUED.)

res. He had been to call on you at your town house, he stopped his automobile to tell me, and, hearing from me that you would be back this evening, he decided to stay all night at the hotel, so that he could have a chat with you after your return, no matter at what hour it might be. I believe he has left a note at your house."

"I will go to him, and we can then discuss its contents together," said Count von Breitstein, and the chauffeur who drove his electric carriage was told to go to the Hohenlangenwald hotel.

The prince, who would, the chancellor hoped, become the deus ex machina, was engaged in selecting the wines for his dinner when Count von Breitstein's card was sent in. He was pleased to say that he would receive his visitor, and, Egon having been sent about his business, the chancellor was shown into the purple drawing room of the suit reserved for royalty.

As he entered a young man jumped up from an easy chair, scattering sheaves of illustrated papers, and held out both his hands, with a "Welcome, my dear old friend!"

It would have been vain to scour the world in quest of a handsomer young man than this one. Even Egon von Breitstein would have seemed a mere good looking puppet beside him, and the chancellor rejoiced in the physical perfection of a prince who might prove a dangerous rival for an absent emperor.

"This is the best of good fortune!" exclaimed Count von Breitstein. "Egon told me you were here, and without waiting to get the note he said you had left for me I came to you straight from the railway station."

"Splendid! And now you must dine with me. It was that I asked of you in my note. Dinner early, a serious talk and an antidote to solemnity in a visit to the Leopoldhalle to see Mlle. Felice from the Folies Bergere do her famous fire and fountain dance. A box, curtains half drawn, no one need know that the chancellor helps his young friend amuse himself."

"I thank your royal highness for the honor you suggest, and nothing could give me greater pleasure if I had not a suggestion to venture, in place of yours, which I believe may suit you better. I think I know of what you wish to talk with me, and I desire the same, while the business I have met at heart."

"Ah, your business is my business, then?"

"I hope you may so consider it. In any case it is business which must be carried through now or never and is of life and death importance to those whom it concerns. How it's to be done or whether done at all may depend on you, if you consent to interest yourself, and it could not be in more competent hands. If I'd been given my choice of an assistant out of the whole world I should have chosen your royal highness."

"This sounds like an adventure," "It may be an adventure and at the same time an act of justice."

"Good. Although it was not in search of an adventure that I came to you, any more than it was the hope of game which brought me on a sudden impulse to my little hunting lodge, still I trust I have always the instinct of a sportsman."

"I am sure of that, and I have the less hesitation in enlisting your good will because it happens that your bird and mine can be killed with one shot."

"Chancellor, you excite my curiosity."

The old man smiled genially, but under the bristling brows glowed a flame of the last embers in a dying fire. "Upstairs," said he, "is a pretty woman, a beauty. She claims the name of Helen Mowbray, though her right to it is more than disputable. Her love affairs threaten a public scandal."

"Ah, you are not the first one who has spoken of this pretty lady since I crossed the frontier this morning," exclaimed the young man, flushing. He paused and bit his lip before going on, as if he wished to think or regain self-control, but at last he laughed not altogether lightly. "So the lady most talked about for the moment in all Rhaetia is under the same roof with me."

"Fortunately she is close at hand," said the chancellor. "To you more than to any other I can open my heart in speaking of our great peril. This girl has drawn the emperor into a fit of moon madness. It is no more serious than that, and were she out of the way he would wake as from a dream. But this is the moment of the crisis. He must be saved now or he is lost forever and all our hopes with him. Blessed would be the man who brought my poor master to his senses. I have tried and failed. But you could do it."

"I?"

"The sword of justice is ready for your hand."

"That sentence has a solemn ring. I don't see what you want me to do. But what sort of woman is this who has bewitched your grave Leopold?"

"Beautiful and clever as women are clever, but not clever enough to fight her battle out against you and me."

The prince laughed again. "It isn't my metier to fight with women. I prefer to make love to them."

"Ah, you have said it! That is what I beg your royal highness to do."

"How am I to get at her when Leopold stands guard?"

"He will not be on guard for some hours."

"Ha, ha! You mean me to understand that there's no time to waste."

"Not a moment."

"What is the girl like?"

"Tall and slender, pink and white as a flower, dark lashed and yellow haired, like an Austrian beauty; eyes gray or violet. It would be heard to say which for a man of my years, but even I can assure you that when the lady looks down, then suddenly up again under those dark lashes, it's something to quicken the pulse of any man under sixty."

"It would quicken mine only to hear your description if you hadn't just put a maggot in my head that tickles me to laughter instead of raptures," said the prince. "Tell me this—has this girl a tiny black mole just over the left eyebrow, very fetching, and when she smiles does her mouth point upward a bit on the right side, like a fairy signpost showing the way to a small round scar almost as good as a dimple?"

The chancellor reflected for a few seconds and then replied that unless his eyesight and his memory had deceived him both these marks were to be met with on Miss Mowbray's face. He did not add that he had seen her but once and at the time had not taken interest enough to note details, for it was plain that the prince had a theory as to the lady's real identity and to establish it as a fact might be valuable.

"Is it possible that you've already met this dangerous young person?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, I begin to believe it may be so. I'll explain why later. Thereby hangs a confession. At all events, a certain lady exactly answering the description you've given is very likely in this neighborhood. I've heard that she was shortly due in Kronburg, and it was in my mind when deciding suddenly to spend a few days in the woods for the sake of seeing you that I might see her also before I went home again. As a matter of fact, the lady and I have had a misunderstanding at a rather unfortunate moment, as I'd just imprudently taken her into my confidence concerning—er—some family affairs. If it is she who is masquerading in Rhaetia as Miss Mowbray and turning your emperor's head, it may be that she's trying to revenge herself on me. She's pretty enough to beguile St. Anthony, let alone a St. Leopold, and she's clever enough to have thought out such a scheme. Our small quarrel happened about four weeks ago, and I've lost sight of the lady since. She disappeared, expecting probably to be followed, but she wasn't. The only question is, if she's playing Miss Mowbray, where did she get the mother? I've heard there is a Mowbray mother."

"There's a faded Dresden china shepherdess that answers to the name," said the chancellor dryly. "But these mantelpiece ornaments are easily manufactured."

The prince was amused. "No; she wouldn't stick at a mother if she wanted one," he chuckled. "And, while she was about it, she has apparently annexed a whole family tree. The black mole and the scar dimple—you're sure of them, chancellor? Because, if you are—"

"Oh, I am practically certain!"

"Then the more pieces in the puzzle which I fit together the more likely does it seem that your Leopold's Miss Helen Mowbray and my Miss Jenny Brett are one and the same."

"Miss Jenny Brett?"

"Did you never hear the name?"

"If I have I've forgotten it."

"Chancellor, you wouldn't forget if you were a few years younger. Jenny Brett is the prettiest if not the most talented singer ever sent out from Australia, the fashionable home of singers. She is billed to sing at the Court theater of Kronburg in a fortnight, her first engagement in Rhaetia."

"You are right. It may well be that she's been having a game with us—a game that we can prevent now, thank heaven, from ending in earnest."

"Oh, yes; we can prevent that."

"Our royal highness met the lady in your own country?"

"No. It was in Paris at first, but I'm afraid I induced her to accept an engagement at home. We were great friends for awhile, and really she's a charming creature. I can't blame myself. Who would have guessed that she'd turn out so ambitious? By Jove, I can sympathize with Leopold. The girl tried to twist me round her finger and, I verily believe, fancied at one time that I would offer her marriage."

"It must be the same girl. And the emperor has offered her marriage."

"What? Impossible! But—with the left hand, of course, though even that would be unheard of for a man in his—"

"I swear to your royal highness that if he isn't stopped he will force her on the Rhaetian people as empress."

"Gad—little Jenny Brett! I didn't half appreciate her brilliant qualities."

"Yet I would wager that she appreciated yours."

The prince shrugged his shoulders. "I believe she really cared something for me—a month ago."

"Then she still cares. You are not a man whom a woman can forget, though plique or ambition may lead her to try. I tell you frankly I believe that Providence sent your royal highness here at this moment, and my best hopes are now pinned on you. You—and no one as well as you—can save the emperor for a nobler fate. Even when I supposed you a stranger to this lady who calls herself Helen Mowbray I thought that if you would consent to meet her and exercise your fascinations there might be hope of averting the danger from my master. Now I hope everything. I beg, I entreat, that your royal highness will send up your name and ask the lady to see you without delay. She will certainly receive you, and when the emperor learns that she has done so it may go far to disillusion him, for, pardon me, your royal highness has a great reputation as a lady killer. Still more valuable would be, however—indeed, he would be cured of his infatuation forever—if—"

"If what?" inquired the young man, fired of the chancellor's long windedness and beating about the bush.

"If you could persuade her to go out to your hunting lodge. Then Leopold and Rhaetia would be saved by you. What could be better? What could be more suitable?"

"What, indeed," echoed the prince, "for every one concerned except for Jenny Brett?"

"Considering the havoc she has worked among us all, need she be considered before the interests of a great country and, perhaps I may hint, an innocent and lovely royal lady whom this girl is doing her best to humiliate?"

"I'm hanged if she need be so considered! Anyhow I'll do what you ask. I'll send up my card, and then we'll see what happens."

The prince took from his pocket a small gold case sparkling with jewels, a trifle which advertised itself as the gift of a woman. Out of this came a card, with a crown over the name in the fashion of his country and some others. An equerry waiting in an adjoining room was summoned, the card given to him, passed on to a hotel servant, and then for five minutes, ten minutes, the old man and the young one waited, talking of a subject very near to both their hearts.

At last, when they had no more to say, word came that Lady Mowbray and Miss Mowbray would see his royal highness.

"The value of a well regulated mother!" laughed the young man, who had not troubled to inquire for Lady Mowbray. "Well, whatever comes of this interview, chancellor, I shall presently have something to tell you."

"The suspense will be hard to bear," said Count von Breitstein. "But I have perfect faith in you. We understand each other completely now, but I'm growing old, and the past few days have tired me sorely. Remember, I pray you, all that's at stake and do not hesitate for an instant. Have no false scruple with such a person as this. The emperor will soon arrive in Kronburg. He'll lose no time in trying to find the girl, and once they've had

another meeting all our plans, all our precautions, may be in vain. He searches for her to offer his crown."

The prince listened and did not smile as he went out.

He had bidden the chancellor await his return in the salon of the royal suit, which was always kept at his disposal when he appeared in the neighborhood, as he often did since purchasing the hunting lodge a few miles out of Kronburg in the forest.

Other foreign royalties or lesser princes from the provinces occasionally occupied the apartments also, and this handsome royal highness of today was not the only one whom the chancellor of Rhaetia had visited there. He knew by heart the rich purple hangings in the salon, with the double wolf head of Rhaetia stamped in gold at regular intervals on the velvet, and he sickened of their splendor now as the moments dragged and he remained alone.

When half an hour had passed he could no longer sit still on the purple velvet sofa, but began walking up and down, his hands behind him, scowling at the full length oil painted portraits of Rhaetia's dead rulers, glaring a question into his own eyes in the long, gold framed mirrors—a question he would have given his life to hear answered in the way he wished.

Three-quarters of an hour had gone at last, and still the chancellor paced the purple drawing room, and still the prince did not come back to tell the news.

Had the young man failed? Had

that siren upstairs beguiled him, as she had beguiled one stronger and greater than he? Was it possible that she had jured the whole secret of their scheme from the prince and then induced him to leave the hotel while her arch enemy fumed in the salon, awaiting his return?

But, no; there were quick footsteps outside the door. The handle was turned. At least his royal highness was not a traitor.

As the chancellor had confessed, he was growing old. He felt suddenly very weak. His lips fell apart, trembling, yet he would not utter the words that hung upon them.

Fortunately the prince read the appeal in the glittering eyes and did not wait to be questioned.

"Well, I've seen the lady and had a talk with her," he said in a voice which was, the old man felt, somehow different in tone from what it had been an hour ago.

"And is she the person you have known?"

"Yes, she's a person I have known. It's—it's all right about that plan of yours, chancellor. She's going with me to the lodge."

"Heaven be praised! It seems almost too good to be true. When does she go?"

"At once—that is, as soon as she can get ready. She will dine with me, and my equerry will stop behind and eat the dinner I had ordered here."

"Magnificent! Then she will go with you alone? Nothing could be better. The presence of the alleged mother as chaperon would be a drawback."

"Oh, no chaperon is needed for us two. The—er—mother remains at the hotel with a la—companion they have, who is ill. It was—er—somehow difficult to arrange this matter, but I don't think the plot I have in mind now will fail, provided you carry through your part as smartly as I have carried mine."

"You may depend upon me. Your royal highness is marvelous. Am I to understand that the lady goes with you quite of her own free will?"

"Quite. I flatter myself that she's rather pleased with the invitation. In a few minutes I and the fair damsel will be spinning away for a drive in my red motor—you know, the one which I always leave at the lodge, to be ready for use whenever I choose to pay a flying visit. I shall keep her out until it's dark to give you plenty of time, but before starting I'll telephone to my chef that, after all, I shan't be away and he must prepare dinner for two."

"I also will send a telephone message," said the chancellor.

"To Leopold?"

"Yes, your royal highness. This time there will be no uncertainty in my words to him. They will strike home, and even if he should not be intending to come to Kronburg tonight they will bring him."

"You are sure you know where to catch the emperor?"

"He'll telephone me from Felgarde when he has found those he sought are not there, as he will, and I must be at my house to receive and answer his message. It will soon be time now."

"Very well; all that seems to arrange itself satisfactorily," said the prince. "Our motor drive can be stretched out for an hour and a half. The lady will then need to dress. Dinner can be kept back till half past 8, if it would suit your book to break in upon us at the table. My dining room isn't very grand, but it has plenty of light and color and wouldn't make a bad background for the last act of this little drama. What do you say, chancellor? I've always thought that your success as a stage manager of the theater of nations was partially due to your eye for dramatic effects."

"Such effects are not to be despised, considering the audience we cater for in that theater."

"Well, I promise you that for our little amateur play tonight in my private theater the footlights shall be lit, the stage set and two of the principal puppets dressed and painted for the show before 9. I suppose you can introduce the leading man by that time or a little later?"

The bristling brows drew together involuntarily. Count von Breitstein was working without scruple against the emperor for the emperor's good, yet he winced at his accomplice's light jest, and it was by an effort that he kept a note of disapproval out of his voice.

"Unless I much mistake, his majesty will order a special train as soon as he has had my message," said he. "That and everything else falling as I confidently expect, I shall be able to bring him out to your royal highness' hunting lodge a little after 9."

"You'll find us at the third course," prophesied the prince.

"Naturally the emperor's appearance will startle your visitor," went on the chancellor, keenly watching the young man's extraordinarily handsome face. "She would not dare take the risk and drive out with you, great as the temptation would no doubt be, did she dream that he would learn of the escapade and follow. Indeed, your royal highness must have found subtle weapons ready to your hand that you so soon broke through the armor of her prudence. I expected much from your magnetism and resourceful wit, yet I hardly dared hope for such speedy, such unqualified success as this which now seems assured to us."

"My weapons were sharpened on my past acquaintance with the pretty lady," explained the prince; "otherwise the result might have been postponed for as many days as I have delayed moments, though at last the end might have been the same."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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